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They Underestimated J.F.K.

By Theodore Sorensen

What manner of man was this John F. Kennedy, the Democrat quoted by Republicans, the liberal invoked by conservatives, the capitalist respected by Communists, the white man revered by blacks, the President who, 25 years after his death, is still hailed even by those too young to remember him?

Certainly he was not all things to all men when in the White House. "K.O. the Kennedys" was the political slogan employed by some Southern Democrats in 1963. The head of the teamsters union called him antilabor. The head of the national Chamber of Commerce called him antibusiness. The left said he was spending too much on defense. The right said he was spending too much on education.

Republican leaders termed his foreign policy "naïve," his Peace Corps "nonsense," his American University speech on Soviet relations "dreadful," his handling of the Cuban missile crisis "brazenly false," his tax cut "fiscal recklessness," his lunar landing goal a "science fiction stunt" and his nuclear test ban treaty "tragic."

Eloquent, candid, objective, informed, he saw no need to shy away from press interrogations or specific positions. There was truth in the 1963 cartoon showing one irate steel executive saying indignantly to another: "This guy Kennedy thinks *he's* running the country!"

As a candidate, impatient with the forces of complacency, he had been even more controversial. Though remembered as our first television President, he campaigned not on the basis of 30 second commercials and sound bites but by reaching out to as many voters in as many crowds in as many states as he possibly could each day, not only with slogans but with ideas — ideas for an Alliance for Progress, an arms control agency, a higher minimum wage and a host of others.

"While I suppose there is no training ground for the Presidency," he later remarked, "I don't think it's a bad idea for a President to have stood outside of Mayer's meat factory in Madison, Wis., at 5:30 in the morning with the temperature 10 degrees above." Who ever heard of a candidate like that?

For all his wealth, education and war heroics, he was the quintessential American. He could loft a pass, swap a joke, hoist a beer, hurt his back and hug his kids like millions of other Americans. Ordinary people identified with him.

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But he was not an ordinary President. A fiscal conservative with liberal priorities, a hard-nosed politician with grace and ideals, an ambitious intellectual with humor and a zest for both statecraft and partisan politics, both fun and hard work, both public adulation and private reflection — who ever heard of a President like that?

The revisionists and reactionaries who hoped that his hold on public affection would wane after his death have clearly underestimated him. That is not surprising. He was underestimated by the candidates who ran against him in the Presidential primaries of 1960, by the Congressmen who opposed the New Frontier legislative program of 1961, by Nikita S. Khrushchev in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and by the Governors of Mississippi and Alabama in the civil rights struggle of 1963.

To be sure, he was never universally beloved. His death was mourned the world over, by governments of every ideological stripe and economic stage. But two notable exceptions speak volumes. In the paranoid pariah state of Communist Albania the unyielding Enver Hoxha expressed satisfaction with Mr. Kennedy's removal from the world scene. And in the tragic kleptocracy of Haiti, the repressive François "Pape Doc" Duvalier declared a national carnival to celebrate.

Nor did Mr. Kennedy seek universal popularity, even in his own country. Asked at a 1962 press conference about a decline in his approval rating in the Gallup Poll, he replied: "If I were 79 percent after a very intense Congressional session, I would feel that I had not met my responsibilities."

Asked the following year at a news conference, only months before his death, about another poll in which 50 percent of the public thought he was "pushing racial integration too fast," he replied that great historic events could not be judged by taking the national temperature every few weeks. "I think we will stand," he said, "after a period of time has gone by."

Twenty-five years later, he still stands. □

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